

Revisiting the charmed circle: A reflexive examination of unanswered questions in the infidelity literature

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Abstract

Infidelity is a common experience in romantic relationships, and as such, relationships researchers have amassed a large infidelity literature. In the current manuscript, we provide a brief overview of the infidelity literature, specifically focusing on how infidelity is defined, infidelity attitudes, predictors of infidelity, and infidelity outcomes. Next, we introduce readers to the “Charmed Circle,” a theoretical perspective that conceptualizes monogamous sex as part of society's view of “good, normal, and natural” sex, otherwise known as mononormativity. As scholars, we are equally socialized in a system that endorses and reinforces mononormativity. In this article, we call on scholars to engage in reflexivity and consider how mononormativity has shaped the infidelity literature and their approach to research. We highlight pressing questions within the infidelity literature and argue that by questioning our own biases, assumptions, and methodologies, we will be able to further advance our understanding of infidelity.

KEYWORDS

consensual non-monogamy, extradyadic, feminist theory, infidelity, monogamism, mononormativity, non-monogamy

1 | INTRODUCTION

Infidelity is a common occurrence within dating, cohabitating, and marital romantic relationships (E. S. Allen et al., 2005; Fincham & May, 2017). As such, scholars have generated a large and varied literature to better understand definitions of infidelity, predictors of infidelity, and outcomes of infidelity for individuals and partnerships (Weiser et al., 2023). Given that infidelity is linked with psychological distress, poorer physical health, and relationship dissolution (Hall & Fincham, 2009; Previti & Amato, 2004; Weigel & Shrout, 2021), researchers have been motivated to understand why individuals engage in infidelity and how individuals navigate their relationship following infidelity. However, we argue that assumptions made by researchers and common methodological practices have left numerous unanswered questions within the infidelity research. In the current article, we call on researchers to actively engage in reflexivity and participate in an internal discourse to examine how our own moral beliefs and adherence to mononormativity have shaped the infidelity literature (K. R. Allen, 2023; Anderson, 2010; Letiecq, 2019). In order for researchers to further advance our understandings of infidelity experiences, we must question how commonly held beliefs have potentially impacted research questions and methodologies.

2 | A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF EXISTING INFIDELITY RESEARCH

At the time of writing, a search for the term “infidelity” in PsycInfo generates a result of over 1500 empirical journal articles, so a true comprehensive review of the literature is beyond the scope of the current paper. This section provides a brief and non-exhaustive review of main themes within the infidelity literature. For those interested in a more thorough review of the infidelity literature, there are many excellent reviews available (see E. S. Allen et al., 2005; Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Fincham & May, 2017; Weiser et al., 2023).

2.1 | Conceptualizing infidelity and infidelity attitudes

Researchers have conducted a number of studies to better understand how individuals conceptualize and define infidelity. Infidelity is generally defined as some type of emotional involvement and/or sexual interaction which is kept secret from a partner and violates the exclusivity expectations of the relationship (Fincham & May, 2017). When conceptualizing infidelity, many scholars distinguish between emotional infidelity, sexual infidelity, and composite infidelity in which emotional and sexual infidelity occur in tandem (Kruger et al., 2015). Women and men similarly define sexual infidelity (i.e., engaging in sexual activity with someone who is not one's partner), but there is greater variability concerning definitions of emotional infidelity (Guitar et al., 2017). Being in love with another person or creating emotional distance by spending time with another were the definitions of emotional infidelity most commonly endorsed by women and men (Guitar et al., 2017). Other researchers have found similar multifaceted definitions in which emotional infidelity is characterized as romantic feelings for another, sharing emotional intimacies with someone else, and involvements that pull one's attention and time away from the primary partnership (Moller & Vossler, 2015; Morrissey et al., 2019).

Other researchers have examined how particular behaviors are defining features of infidelity. In a study of U.S. undergraduate students, participants evaluated how indicative 27 different behaviors were of cheating, ranging from sexual behaviors to financial support. The researchers found that the vast majority of participants viewed coitus, oral sex, and showering together as indicative of cheating; there was mixed support for spending a lot of time together, forming a deep emotional bond, and holding hands; and most participants did not view hugging, giving \$5, and calling when upset about work as indicative of cheating (Kruger et al., 2013). In a study with U.S. adolescents, eight categories of infidelity behaviors were found: physical behaviors, secret-keeping, affect, cognitions, verbal, romantic/intimate involvement, time expenditure, and range of behaviors (i.e., responses that include

a wide array of behaviors) (Norona et al., 2015). Thompson and O'Sullivan (2016) developed the Definitions of Infidelity Questionnaire, in which four categories of infidelity behaviors emerged: sexual/explicit behaviors, emotional/affectionate behaviors, technology/online behaviors, and solitary behaviors (e.g., watching pornography, checking out attractive individuals). Except for solitary behaviors, men rated all behaviors as less indicative of infidelity than women (Thompson & O'Sullivan, 2016). Online infidelity behaviors can include online sexual interactions (e.g., talking 'dirty' with someone online), emotional involvement with an online contact, dating online while in a relationship, and technologically-mediated sexual behaviors (Henline et al., 2007). In contrast to studies that primarily define infidelity as the presence or absence of particular behaviors, Weiser et al. (2014) conducted a prototype analysis to understand the "fuzzy" boundaries of infidelity. Across four studies, the researchers found five themes that defined infidelity: (1) violation (unfaithful, cheating); (2) secretiveness (dishonest, lying, sneaking around); (3) immorality (wrong, bad); (4) consequences (break up, mistrust); and (5) emotional outcomes (pain, heartbreak, hurt).

Regardless of how researchers and laypeople define infidelity, researchers consistently find negative attitudes towards infidelity and disapproval of nonconsensual extradyadic activities (Boon et al., 2014; Twenge et al., 2015). Using nationally representative data from the 2016 General Social Survey, researchers found that 75.8% of participants agreed that a "married person having sexual relations with someone other than the marriage partner" was always wrong (Labrecque & Whisman, 2017). Researchers also find that women, at least in the U.S., have more negative attitudes toward infidelity compared to men (Ahrold & Meston, 2010; Labrecque & Whisman, 2017). In a vignette study, hypothetical individuals who engaged in sexual infidelity were viewed as less ethical, more immoral, more disgusting, less pure, less loyal, less caring, and more harmful compared to individuals who broke up with a partner before having sex with another individual (Selterman et al., 2018). Researchers also find that individuals rate fidelity and faithfulness as highly valued characteristics in romantic partners (Watkins & Boon, 2016).

2.2 | Predictors of infidelity

Researchers have conducted a tremendous amount of work to understand predictors of infidelity (Weiser et al., 2023). A number of individual traits are associated with infidelity, including the Big Five personality dimensions (agreeableness, extraversion, openness, neuroticism, and conscientiousness) and the Dark Triad (narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) (Altgelt et al., 2018; Barta & Kiene, 2005; Fincham & May, 2017; Jones & Weiser, 2014; Mahambrey, 2020; Schmitt, 2004; Timmermans et al., 2018). Researchers consistently find individuals lower on agreeableness and conscientiousness and higher on extraversion, openness, neuroticism, narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy are more likely to engage in infidelity; however, the association with openness is less consistently found (Schmitt, 2004). Permissive attitudes toward sex, viewing sexually explicit materials, and sociosexuality are positively associated with infidelity (Fincham & May, 2017; Liu & Zheng, 2019; Maddox et al., 2011; Penke & Asendorpf, 2008; Rodrigues et al., 2017; Vowels et al., 2022; Weiser et al., 2018). Attachment styles have also been linked with infidelity: securely attached individuals, those with less avoidant and anxious attachments, engage in infidelity at lower rates compared to those with insecure attachments (Bogaert & Sadava, 2002; DeWall et al., 2011; Russell et al., 2013).

Positive relational factors, including greater relationship quality, commitment, love, positive communication patterns, relationship satisfaction, sexual desire, and sexual frequency are all associated with lower infidelity rates (Atkins et al., 2001; Gibson et al., 2016; Haseli et al., 2019; Havlicek et al., 2011; Lee & O'Sullivan, 2019; Martins et al., 2016; Scott et al., 2017; Vowels et al., 2022; Whisman et al., 2007). Indeed, these relationship factors appear to be better predictors of infidelity compared to personality traits and individual factors (Haseli et al., 2019; Maddox Shaw et al., 2013; Mark et al., 2011; Vowels et al., 2022). Researchers also find that infidelity is both a cause and consequence of poorer relationship quality. Using data from a 17-year longitudinal study, Previti and Amato (2004) found that divorce proneness (regularity of thinking about divorce) predicted greater extramarital

sex, and that extramarital sex was associated with lower marital happiness, increased divorce proneness, and increased odds of divorce. Using longitudinal dyadic data from Germany, researchers found that infidelity was preceded by a gradual decrease in personal well-being and relationship quality for both transgressors and non-involved partners (Stavrova et al., 2023). Interestingly, women are more likely to report relationship dissatisfaction and neglect as motivating infidelity, whereas men are more likely to be motivated by a need for sexual variety or sexual frequency (Barta & Kiene, 2005; Hackathorn & Ashdown, 2021; Selterman et al., 2019). Individuals who are motivated to engage in infidelity because of lack of love and neglect have greater intimacy with infidelity partners, have infidelity experiences that last longer, are more likely to break up with primary partners, and are more likely to disclose the infidelity to their primary partners (Selterman et al., 2020). Additional interpersonal factors, such as family history, predict infidelity as individuals whose parents engaged in infidelity and parental divorce are associated with an increased likelihood of infidelity (DeMaris, 2009; Maddox Shaw et al., 2013; Weiser & Weigel, 2017).

Researchers find that men engage in infidelity at higher rates compared to women, including offline and online infidelity (Labrecque & Whisman, 2017; Martins et al., 2016); however, there is evidence that this gender gap is shrinking among younger cohorts (Atkins et al., 2001). A small amount of research has examined racial/ethnic differences within the U.S. This work finds that Black and Hispanic/Latinx participants engage in infidelity at higher rates compared to individuals with other racial/ethnic identities (Munsch, 2015; Whisman & Snyder, 2007), although these studies do not probe sociocultural reasons underlying these patterns nor provide nuance about who composes the reference group in statistical analyses. Mixed results have been found concerning education attainment and infidelity. With data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Munsch (2015) found that having a college degree was associated with a lower likelihood of infidelity, yet using the General Social Survey, Atkins et al. (2001) found a positive association between education and likelihood of engaging in infidelity. In a Portuguese sample, women with more education were more likely to engage in infidelity (Martins et al., 2016), and among Taiwanese adults, education was not associated with infidelity (Tu & Hsieh, 2017). Income was not associated with infidelity for those making up to \$30,000 per year; however, for participants earning more than \$30,000 per year, there was a positive association between infidelity and income (Atkins et al., 2001). Finally, religiosity is negatively associated with infidelity (Whisman et al., 2007).

2.3 | Reactions to and outcomes of infidelity

Researchers find negative consequences for both infidelity transgressors and non-involved partners. Infidelity transgressors report lower well-being and more depressive symptoms, guilt, shame, and distress compared to faithful partners (Hall & Fincham, 2009; Stavrova et al., 2023). Among non-involved partners, participants report poorer mental health and more health-compromising behaviors (Atkins et al., 2010; Cano & O'Leary, 2000; Shrout & Weigel, 2018; Stavrova et al., 2023). Indeed, infidelity is rated as the most serious relationship transgression regarding feeling hurt, powerless, and long-term effects on well-being compared to other transgressions (Feeney, 2004). Even suspected infidelity is associated with poorer relational, physical, and emotional well-being (Davis et al., 2018; Kaufman-Parks et al., 2019; Monk et al., 2020; Weigel & Shrout, 2021). Not surprisingly, infidelity is commonly linked with relationship dissolution and divorce (Cano et al., 2004; Negash et al., 2014; Previti & Amato, 2004; Shrout & Weigel, 2019), although not all relationships are disrupted following infidelity (Træen & Martinussen, 2008).

An immense amount of research has examined how participants react to hypothetical infidelity scenarios, and many of these studies specifically probed whether participants would be more upset about hypothetical emotional or sexual infidelity. Overall, researchers find participants view hypothetical emotional infidelities as more hurtful than hypothetical sexual infidelities (de Visser et al., 2020; Henline et al., 2007; Vaughn Becker et al., 2004). Individuals higher on sociosexuality rate sexual infidelity as more distressing than emotional infidelity, whereas

individuals low on sociosexuality rate emotional infidelity as more distressing than sexual infidelity (Treger & Sprecher, 2011). Many studies have used an evolutionary perspective to examine gender differences for expected distress to infidelity and find that women are more distressed by hypothetical emotional infidelity than sexual infidelity, whereas men are more distressed by hypothetical sexual infidelity compared to emotional infidelity (de Visser et al., 2020; Sagarin & Guadagno, 2004; Treger & Sprecher, 2011). These findings are consistent with an evolutionary perspective. However, a meta-analysis found both women and men are more upset by emotional infidelity than sexual infidelity using a forced-choice paradigm, and gender differences were most robust in U.S. student samples (Carpenter, 2012). The meta-analysis also found that when researchers asked participants to rate the degree of their distress separately with continuous measures (rather than the forced-choice paradigm), sexual infidelity was rated as more distressing by women and men. Moreover, gender differences are not found in the degree of distress among those who experienced actual infidelity (Berman & Frazier, 2005; Harris, 2005).

3 | THE CHARMED CIRCLE AND MONONORMATIVITY

Given what is currently known in the infidelity literature, and the impressive amount of infidelity research conducted to date, we query, "What do we still *not* know about infidelity and *why*?" In the 1980s, anthropologist and queer studies pioneer Gayle Rubin developed a diagram illustrating society's valuation of sexuality and how this sexual value system dictates which sex is acceptable and which sex is stigmatized (Rubin, 1984). Dubbed the "Charmed Circle," Rubin (1984) argued that sexual relationships within the Charmed Circle boundary are considered "good, normal, natural, blessed sexuality." Monogamous sexuality is a key aspect of this acceptable form of sexuality, along with sex that occurs among married, heterosexual, cisgender individuals for the purpose of procreation. Rubin (1984) argues that only sex acts within the Charmed Circle are afforded complexity and careful examination, whereas sex acts outside the Charmed Circle are denied nuance and viewed as uniformly bad, wrong, and immoral. Given the negative views of both consensual and non-consensual non-monogamy (Conley, Moors, et al., 2013; Conley, Ziegler, et al., 2013; Labrecque & Whisman, 2017; Twenge et al., 2015), it is clear that monogamous sex is still part of the Charmed Circle.

Implicated within the Charmed Circle is the concept of mononormativity, or the establishment of monogamy as ideal, preferred, and natural (S. H. Allen & Mendez, 2018; Schippers, 2016). Mononormativity is rooted in the notion that "good" relationships are partnerships composed of two white, heterosexual, cisgender, middle-class, and married individuals (also known as the Standard North American Family ideology or SNAF) (Smith, 1993). This valuation of partnerships and families that adhere to SNAF and mononormativity creates and reinforces a culture in which partnerships that violate these idealized norms are viewed as deviant and stigmatized. For consensual non-monogamous partnerships, this stigmatization can have very real interpersonal, social, and legal discrimination (Conley, Ziegler, et al., 2013; Pallotta-Chiarolli et al., 2020). For example, Pallotta-Chiarolli et al. (2020) argued that "for polyfamilies, their assumed pathology is often closely linked to actual or feared surveillance via city, county, and state mechanisms such as Child Protective Services" (p. 179). With regard to non-consensual non-monogamy, or infidelity, most individuals view infidelity as immoral (Labrecque & Whisman, 2017; Selterman et al., 2018; Weiser et al., 2014). These negative attitudes towards infidelity are certainly partially due to the harm caused by infidelity. Yet, the paradox remains that a substantial number of U.S. adults have engaged in some form of infidelity in their lifetime (Weiser et al., 2023). Furthermore, throughout history and across cultures there have been varied views of infidelity, and beliefs about infidelity are not universal (Tsapelas et al., 2011). However, as Rubin (1984) argues "only sex acts on the good side of the line are accorded moral complexity" and it is possible that researchers have been limited in their imagination and analysis of infidelity due to the forces of mononormativity. Thus, it is a valuable endeavor to consider how social discourse has shaped individuals' relationship experiences as well as the work of relationship scientists.

Anderson (2010) applied hegemony theory to examine how mononormativity shapes relationship experiences. Hegemony refers to a system of values, beliefs, and norms legitimized, normalized, and reinforced not through force but through a dominant discourse in which individuals view this system and their participation as natural and normal due to socialization and institutions. Hegemony then establishes hierarchies in which particular identities, behaviors, and beliefs are valued over others and not questioned. According to Anderson (2010), mononormativity is a hegemonic ideal in which individuals are socialized to seek and value monogamy without question, and subsequently, any form of non-monogamy is stigmatized and shameful. The young men in their qualitative study engaged in infidelity yet valued monogamy. Anderson (2010) argues this paradox occurs because internalized mononormativity prevents them from examining whether monogamy is beneficial and also allows them to distance themselves from the perceived immorality of non-monogamy. To unquestionably uphold monogamy as ideal can theoretically contribute to society's demonization of any non-monogamous sexual behavior. As a result, monogamy is encouraged, and mononormativity is sustained and reinforced (Mint, 2004). Challenging mononormativity disrupts multiple axes of oppression and reveals new truths about romantic relationships and families.

This mononormative worldview is reinforced by other systems of oppression as well (Letiecq, 2019; Oswald et al., 2009; Schippers, 2016; Smith, 1993). Rubin (1984) grounds the Charmed Circle in critiques of heteronormativity and patriarchal values, including a firm rejection of gender and sexual essentialism. Instead, Rubin (1984) argues that how we enact gender and sexuality is through social construction and discourse. While Rubin (1984) critiques the limits of feminist theories to fully illuminate and challenge sexual hierarchies that afford privilege and moral superiority to individuals who exist in the Charmed Circle, she acknowledges the role of gender in regulating sexuality. Indeed, women's sexuality is controlled, scrutinized, and repressed to a greater degree than men's sexuality (Allen, 2023). This diminished sexual freedom helps explain why, compared to men, when women engage in infidelity they are judged more negatively and their relationships are more likely to end (Brand et al., 2007; Weiser et al., 2023). Women who violate mononormativity may suffer greater personal, relational, and social consequences than men.

Although considerations of racism and white supremacy are not incorporated in the Charmed Circle, Rubin (1984) argues that the sexual value hierarchy functions similarly to other systems of oppression, including racism. We argue that further consideration of how white supremacy operates in conjunction with heteropatriarchy to maintain and reinforce the Charmed Circle is a natural extension of Rubin's original model. Rubin (1984) acknowledged that rich, white men who deviate from sexual norms will experience less severe social and legal consequences compared to poor, Black women. Thus, it is theorized within the Charmed Circle that relationships adhering to mononormative standards through SNAF, especially monogamous marriages of white heterosexual individuals, receive numerous societal, legal, and financial benefits (Letiecq, 2024; Rubin, 1984). By codifying these privileges and reifying discourse that reveres monogamy, white heterosexual spouses and their families amass institutional power and resources (Letiecq, 2024). Throughout U.S. history, laws and structural barriers created and upheld by systematic racism have made the maintenance of romantic relationships more challenging for individuals racialized as Black (Landor & Barr, 2018; Letiecq, 2024; Orbuch et al., 2002). Schippers (2016) discusses how much of the pathologization of Black families is rooted in the intersection of mononormativity, heteropatriarchy, and white supremacy. As Schippers (2016) states, "to the extent that discourses of 'multiple fathers' or 'many children by multiple women' are racialized as features of African American family relations, the monogamous couple in its idealized form was discursively attached to whiteness and *mononormativity* was central to this construction" (p. 42). Thus, Black families, especially Black women-headed households, are viewed as inferior and lacking because many of these families do not uphold hegemonic ideals of "husband" and "wife" within the context of a monogamous marital partnership. Accordingly, mononormativity reinforces privileges and oppressions in a white heteropatriarchal system.

As researchers, we must recognize that our beliefs about romantic relationships shape how we approach our work (K. R. Allen, 2000; Rice, 2023). Just as our participants are socialized to idealize monogamy, so are social scientists, given that we are socialized in the same systems as those we study. To move the infidelity literature

forward, scholars need to look inward to examine how mononormativity has shaped our understanding of relationships and our approaches to researching infidelity. In other words, we as scholars need to engage in the practice of reflexivity. Reflexivity is an active and ongoing process in which one examines their own biases, assumptions, and ways of knowing (K. R. Allen, 2000). Reflexivity necessitates an active internal dialog between oneself, others, and the environment to uncover hegemonic assumptions (Letiecq, 2019). Through the process of reflexivity, we can see many pieces of the infidelity literature puzzle which have been obscured through a lens of mononormativity. As Allen (2023) argues “being aware of how much I *do not know* opens the door to intellectual curiosity and openness to change” (p. 902).

In the next section, we pose several unanswered questions in the infidelity literature and encourage readers to consider *why* scholars have left these stones unturned. As Rubin (1984) notes, sexual and relationship activities viewed as “bad” and outside the Charmed Circle are denied complexity and nuance. Many critical theorists have argued that to disrupt systems of oppression and stigma, it is essential to center the voices of the marginalized and explore in-depth varied life experiences (Few, 2009; Fish & Russell, 2018). Therefore, the questions we pose focus on better understanding the complexities of infidelity and the experiences of individuals involved in infidelity. It should be noted that we are not arguing that infidelity is beneficial or that it is not harmful to individuals and relationships. There are many practical reasons why laypeople and researchers alike would view infidelity negatively, including the resulting negative relationship outcomes and sexual health concerns associated with infidelity (Weiser et al., 2023). Moreover, monogamous relationships can be highly beneficial and the ideal relationship agreement for many individuals (Conley et al., 2013). Yet, Rubin (1984) argues that any singular sexual expectation or universal relationship standard is problematic. We are, therefore, drawing researchers' attention to the concept of mononormativity and questioning whether unexamined mononormativity has played some role in how scholars have approached the study of infidelity.

3.1 | Unanswered questions in the infidelity literature—And recommendations for addressing them

3.1.1 | What do infidelity partnerships look like?

When conceptualizing infidelity and studying whether infidelity occurred, many researchers have used a simplistic measurement approach (Weiser et al., 2023). Researchers, including the current authors, have designed countless studies where infidelity is assessed by asking participants to indicate yes/no whether infidelity occurred in their relationship. Such an approach may underestimate infidelity rates and prevent scholars from studying infidelity in a more multidimensional way (E. S. Allen et al., 2005). Indeed, in their chapter on long-term infidelities, Weiser et al. (2022) reported challenges operationalizing long-term infidelity since so few researchers had assessed the length and nature of infidelity partnerships. Weiser et al. (2022) recommend that researchers should ask about type of involvement, length of the involvement, number of partners, how the infidelity started, how the infidelity was maintained, length of time since the infidelity, and information about the infidelity partner. By measuring only whether infidelity occurred, we are missing key information about the complexities, intricacies, and trajectories of infidelity involvements. This oversight in the infidelity literature is not due solely to mononormative biases but these beliefs may have contributed to the oversimplification of infidelity assessments.

There is certainly research that has asked participants about the nature of their infidelity involvement and motivations for infidelity (Jackman, 2015; Jeanfreau et al., 2014; Omarzu et al., 2012; Perez et al., 2023; Varma & Maheshwari, 2023), as well as research that examines how facets of infidelity impact personal and relational outcomes (Afifi et al., 2001; Stavrova et al., 2023; Weiser & Weigel, 2014). In an outstanding article, Selterman et al. (2020) conducted a comprehensive study about participants' experiences during and after infidelity, as well as

their motivations for engaging in infidelity. This study, although using a convenience sample, provides illuminating information about the trajectories of infidelity involvements lasting from one day to 5 years. More research along this vein is needed and would provide a much more complete and multifaceted understanding of infidelity experiences.

Further, many researchers have operationalized any extradyadic activity while in a committed relationship as infidelity, which conflates consensual and non-consensual non-monogamy (Lehmiller & Selterman, 2022). For example, using data from the General Social Survey, Labrecque and Whisman (2017) measured “extramarital sex” by counting individuals who reported more than one sexual partner in the last 12 months or reported one sex partner who was not their spouse or regular sex partner. While the authors are consistent in labeling their variable as “extramarital sex” and the authors are careful to note that the GSS does not provide an option to denote a consensually non-monogamous relationship, the assumption is that any extradyadic sexual activity is infidelity. Researchers must be more careful in their work to distinguish between consensual and non-consensual non-monogamy and not assume extradyadic activity is synonymous with infidelity. While some researchers have adopted the terms “extradyadic” or “extramarital” to avoid the negative connotation of infidelity and be appropriately descriptive of their variable, researchers still often obscure the relationship agreements of their participants. Thus, by attempting to be more neutral, researchers may be enacting mononormativity through assumed or ascribed monogamy and their silence on consensual non-monogamy. More research using a comprehensive approach to assessing infidelity will be instrumental to advancing our field and ensuring that scholars are truly studying infidelity. Moreover, research that explores transgressions within consensual non-monogamous relationships will bring novel information to the field (Andersson, 2022; Mint, 2004). Mononormativity is not a singular explanation for these methodological approaches, but through the Charmed Circle perspective, this lack of methodological nuance can at least be partially attributed to the lack of complexity afforded “immoral” behaviors.

The infidelity literature would also benefit from examining infidelity from the perspective of all parties. The vast majority of infidelity research has examined transgressors and non-involved partners to the detriment of understanding the experiences and perspectives of infidelity partners (i.e., the third party) (Weiser & Weigel, 2015). Unfortunately, the infidelity partner is often vilified and gendered as “the Other Woman” (Schippers, 2016; Utley, 2016), and little research has been conducted on this topic. This scholarly ignoring of the infidelity partner is likely because of researchers' own biases against third parties, greater sympathies for the non-involved parties, and fascination with the betrayer. Studying the infidelity partner, however, will give researchers a richer and more complete view of infidelity experiences. For example, Weiser and Weigel (2015) found that about 40% of infidelity partners learned they were engaging in infidelity because the transgressor told them, and another 24% found out because an acquaintance or friend told them. Utley (2016) explored how infidelity partners maintained agency and achieved empowerment through their infidelity involvement and how personal growth may be one positive outcome from their experience.

There may be particular methodological challenges to recruiting infidelity partners to participate in research, either due to social desirability grounded in mononormativity or because many third parties may unknowingly be an infidelity partner. That said, researchers have been able to successfully recruit infidelity partners to participate in research. For example, in a convenience sample of 922 U.S. adults recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) to take part in a study about romantic relationships, 337 participants reported experience as an infidelity partner and provided data about their experience (Weiser, 2016). Studying the experiences and identities of infidelity partners will greatly expand the infidelity literature, and after all, infidelity cannot occur without infidelity partners. We ask scholars to consider why most research has focused on transgressors and non-involved partners, and the role that mononormativity may play in this obscuration of infidelity partners in the literature.

3.1.2 | Who are we missing in the infidelity literature?

In our recent systematic review of the infidelity literature, we found the vast majority of infidelity research was conducted with young, White, heterosexual, cisgender adults residing in the U.S. and Canada (Weiser et al., 2023), a finding similar to the relationships literature broadly (Williamson et al., 2022). With regard to age, 54% of studies included in the systematic review used samples of emerging/young adults (ages 18–29). We found that 50.9% of included studies had all or majority White/European American samples, and another 24.8% did not provide demographic information about race/ethnicity. Only 3.1% of studies explicitly included trans and non-binary participants, and 17.3% of studies included LGBTQ + participants, with another 55.5% of studies not presenting information about sexual identity. Moreover, out of the 162 studies included in the systematic review, not a single study reported on ability status, a concern given that many individuals with mental and physical disabilities are in relationships and are sexually active (Mamali et al., 2020). Thus, while lack of sample diversity and limited external validity is a broader concern in the literature, and not necessarily due to mononormativity, we think it is important to understand these limitations specific to the infidelity literature and how mononormativity intersects with white heteropatriarchy.

Given that mononormativity works in conjunction with other systems of oppression, including white supremacy and heteropatriarchy (S. H. Allen & Mendez, 2018; Letiecq, 2019), considering *who* we are missing within the infidelity literature is an essential task. Considering the sociohistorical context of participants and studying within group differences, instead of merely between group differences, will illuminate *why* infidelity experiences may unfold in particular ways for individuals (Few, 2009; Fish & Russell, 2018). While some research has examined infidelity in the context of race/ethnicity in the U.S., this research has been sparse (Campbell et al., 2022). As discussed earlier, some research finds higher rates of infidelity for Black individuals, particularly Black men, but much of this research lacks sociohistorical context (Campbell et al., 2022). Utey (2011) studied Black women's experiences with infidelity transgressors and implicated sociohistorical forces, including how the legacy of slavery continues to influence relationships, and a gender ratio imbalance with the limited availability of Black men because of greater mortality and mass incarceration due to structural racism. These environmental factors then lead to conditions that support Black men's engagement in infidelity and Black women's potential tolerance for infidelity in relationships (Landor & Barr, 2018; Utey, 2011). To advance scholarly discourse, scholars must foreground systems of oppression, including the intersection of mononormativity and white supremacy, that influence their participants' relationship decision-making to engage in infidelity and how they respond to a partner's transgression (Weiser et al., 2023).

In addition to further examining systems of oppression, infidelity scholars must also be better at conducting work that includes LGBTQIA individuals and challenging both heteronormative and mononormative assumptions about relationships (Allen & Mendez, 2018). While individuals with queer sexual identities tend to engage in consensual non-monogamy at higher rates and are more accepting of consensual non-monogamy, there is very little contemporary research that has examined infidelity among LGBTQIA individuals (Lehmiller & Selterman, 2022). In one nationally representative study, researchers found about 8% of heterosexual men, 14% of gay men, 34% of bisexual men, and 6% of men with another sexual identity reported infidelity; for women, 7% of heterosexual women, 6% of lesbian women, 12% of bisexual women, and 6% of women with another sexual identity reported infidelity (Levine et al., 2018). Researchers also find changes in sexual attractions and preferences for sexual behaviors during the gender affirmation process for trans individuals (Cerwenka et al., 2014; Katz-Wise et al., 2017), which may potentially impact relationship and sexual satisfaction, and perhaps lead to infidelity. These data suggest studying infidelity among LGBTQIA individuals is a particularly important topic for researchers to undertake, and knowing so little about infidelity in queer partnerships is a major gap within the infidelity literature (Lehmiller & Selterman, 2022). Mononormativity operates hand-in-hand with heteronormativity (S. H. Allen & Mendez, 2018), so challenging hegemonic assumptions and broadening who is represented in the infidelity literature is an essential next step for infidelity scholars.

4 | CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we call on scholars to engage in reflexivity to expand the infidelity literature and challenge mononormativity. Our own moral biases as highlighted in the Charmed Circle, immersion in a mononormative society, and skewed samples that permeate all of relationship science, ultimately limit the questions we have asked and answered when investigating infidelity. This is not to say that the research conducted to date has not been extremely important, nor should we ignore the very real harm infidelity can inflict. We also do not argue that mononormativity is a singular force shaping the infidelity literature. Instead, we urge scholars to consider *why* they are asking particular research questions, and to consider how mononormativity and other hegemonic beliefs are shaping their assumptions, ideas, samples, and methodological approaches. Through the reflexivity process, researchers can adopt a new and expanded lens and create a paradigmatic shift within the infidelity literature. We offer a few pressing questions about infidelity and several recommendations, although there are many more unanswered questions in this line of research. There is much research still to be done on infidelity, and it is an exciting time to be an infidelity researcher who engages in this self-reflection process.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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